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CAKES (Cultural Awareness & Knowledge Exchange Scheme): A holistic and inclusive approach to supporting international students

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CAKES (Cultural Awareness & Knowledge Exchange Scheme): A holistic and inclusive approach to supporting international students

Transition support for international students has traditionally adopted deficit models which attempt to 'fix' assumed academic literacy problems (Hughes, 2013). This study explores a more culturally inclusive initiative which supported international students at a UK university in a holistic and developmental way. The initiative was delivered across an academic year and a mix of focus groups and semi-structured interviews were undertaken to understand students' experiences of participating in it. Although small-scale, the initiative emerged as a lively learning community which supported both academic and sociocultural transition. Qualitative data illuminate a number of fruitful methodological foci, including informality of the learning space and exploration of intercultural learning and teaching practices. Findings indicate that these cultural explorations were instrumental in helping students navigate the new learning and teaching system and forge a stronger sense of academic and social belonging. These outcomes were cultivated within an ethos that valued and enhanced the diverse skills, identities and attributes that students brought, rather than one that suppressed their previous learning practices. Findings thus demonstrate how transition and academic success can be facilitated in ways that do not problematize international students and highlight the need for more holistic and inclusive ways of supporting them.

Keywords: international students, transition support, academic transition, sociocultural transition, intercultural learning, cultural learning differences

Introduction

Increasing numbers of students are opting to study higher education programmes abroad where they can explore new cultures, enhance their cross-cultural skills and gain high status overseas qualifications (e.g. Dalglish et al. 2011; Tarry 2011). There are tremendous gains for the classroom too, where differing communication, learning styles, cultural perspectives and life experiences can enrich the learning process (Lord

and Dawson 2003). Whilst these benefits are often claimed as motives for international recruitment, in another discourse international education is seen as big business and intense competition exists in the marketplace (Tarry 2011). As is the case in other Western countries, internationalisation is seen as critical to the strength of UK higher education (Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2010). This stance, in which international students are valued in financial terms, has resulted in a weakened emphasis on ethical and educational issues (Robson and Turner 2007). Ryan and Viète (2009) highlight the contradiction of universities acknowledging the benefits of a multicultural classroom, yet providing a one-way pedagogical approach which prevents reciprocity in learning. Within this context, concern exists about the academic and socio-cultural transition of international students and whether UK universities are providing adequate support (Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2010). Moreover, there are a number of problems inherent in traditional support mechanisms, which assume inadequacies in students' academic literacies and the need for pedagogical adaptations. The aim of this paper is to explore a more culturally inclusive approach to facilitating transition among international students and in doing so, contribute to new ways of conceptualising how they should be supported.

Transition related challenges among international students

Transition to higher education is a multifaceted process which can be stressful for many students (Hughes and Smail 2015). For international students, the process can be especially complex, encompassing a range of linguistic, cultural and pedagogical challenges. Language is perhaps the most obvious of these and indeed a number of works discuss the linguistic challenges faced by international students (e.g. Rienties, Luchoomun, and Tempelaar 2014; Ryan and Viète 2009; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2009), including 'hidden' language forms or 'codes' which can lead to

misinterpretations (McLean and Ransom 2005; Ryan and Viete 2009). Students must also adapt to different pedagogies and learning cultures which can present significant challenges. For example, in their cross-institutional study of masters students, Rienties, Luchoomun, and Tempelaar (2014) reported that over half of their respondents experienced extensive changes to their learning strategies. Other adjustment issues have been reported in relation to academic reading (Gebhard 2012), taking lecture notes (Huang 2006), time management (Brydon 2011), use of library structures (Anderson et al. 2009) and group work (Gabriel and Griffiths 2008). The magnitude of these challenges is consistently evident in the literature, with various authors using the term 'learning shock' (Gabriel and Griffiths 2008; Griffiths, Winstanley, and Gabriel 2005; Huang 2012) to articulate their acute and enduring impact.

Other studies have explored the social and psychological dimensions of transition. Social transition is especially important for international students who are far from family and friends and inexperienced in the culture of the host country (Rienties et al. 2012); however, it may not be an easy process. In their study of four UK institutions, Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day (2010) found that over 50% of participants were unhappy with their social lives and almost a third felt lonely. Participants also reported feeling a sense of powerlessness and lack of belonging. Similarly, Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2010) reported isolation, rejection, loneliness and absence of friends among international students at the University of Toledo. Elsewhere international students' experiences of identity loss (Ryan and Viete 2009; Gabriel, and Griffiths 2008), and depression and anxiety (Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomson 2010; Gebhard 2012) have been documented. Ryan and Viete (2009), for example, provide a powerful account of the deep personal impact to one's sense of self when entering a new learning culture,

capturing students' experiences of being ignored, dismissed and marginalised, despite formerly excelling in their home countries.

The influence of culture on transition

Early writings on adaptation among international students attributed difficulties to cultural differences in learning and teaching. Most notably, Hofstede's (1986) cultural dimensions attempted to explain how cultural differences shape expectations including the role of teachers and responsibilities of students. Accordingly, students from low 'power distance' cultures are at ease with the student-centred education of the Western tradition, whereas teacher-centred education best suits those familiar with high power distance (Rienties, Luchoomun, and Tempelaar 2014). While Western-style higher education favours critical thinking, group discussion, problem solving and the possibility of multiple perspectives (Dalglish et al. 2011), in high power distance cultures the teacher is considered the expert, demands high levels of respect and is never criticised (McLean and Ransom 2005). Likewise, learning practices in 'collectivist' cultures differ from the Western tradition, where individuals have a strong sense of loyalty to each other and expect permanent loyalty in return. They may therefore expect more direction and support than Western academics are prepared to provide (McKinnon 2013).

Following this model of cultural learning, discourse on cultural pedagogical differences and cognitive abilities of students has flourished. For example, one line of inquiry has considered critical thinking and has typically portrayed international students as surface learners in comparison to their local counterparts (Brydon 2011). However, this may be a misconception as numerous studies have demonstrated international students' aptitudes for deep and critical forms of learning (e.g. Egege and Kutieleh 2004; Jones 2005; Volet, Renshaw, and Tietzel 1994). This incongruence

exemplifies an important criticism of the literature. Whilst explanatory constructs such as those presented by Hofstede (1986) may be intuitively appealing, there are risks associated with making assumptions about learners and their cultural labels. Such a tendency to generalise, and therefore stereotype, fails to account for the huge variations both between and within cultures (Dalglish et al. 2011; Wenhua and Zhe 2013). Caution is therefore warranted when using culture as an explanatory construct as it may oversimplify a complex scenario. Moreover, within the context of transition support, although approaches that examine the cultural underpinnings of different educational contexts are advocated here, overgeneralising cultural learning styles may lead to the provision of support mechanisms that undermine international students' cognitive abilities.

Supporting international student transition and limitations of the literature

It is recognised that amongst students in general, successful transition requires effective support (Hughes and Smail 2015). This support need may be even stronger amongst international students as they encounter different learning environments, culture and pedagogies. Supporting international students should therefore be an important priority for higher education institutions, especially given their investment in international student recruitment. However, international students often lack adequate support, which can leave them feeling dissatisfied and in some cases, exploited (Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010). Whilst the literature lacks generosity in providing clear recommendations on how to support international student transition, one helpful strand of research has examined the role of social networks. Although recognised as highly influential to student learning in general (Hommes et al. 2012), social networks may have particular value to international students from collectivist cultures where working as a group and supporting others is the cultural norm. Moreover, the fostering of social networks

provides a mechanism by which international students can remain connected to their native cultures (Romerhausen 2013). The positive impact of social networks on adaptation among international students has been reported in numerous works (e.g. Gomes et al. 2014; Lee, Lee, and Jang 2011; Menzies and Baron 2014; Yeh and Inose 2003). These highlight their potential for fostering friendships, peer support and the important sense of belonging which international students often lack (Ryan and Viete 2009).

Approaches that address academic transition are less fruitful and subject to various limitations. These tend to problematize international students by adopting deficit models, typically in the form of one-off study skills courses (Guo and Chase 2011; Carroll and Appleton 2007). Rather than being recognised for their valuable insights and experiences, students are often seen as ‘special needs’ with limited academic literacies and an assumed range of difficulties (Hughes 2013). Others suggest that teachers can address academic transition problems by expanding their teaching strategies to accommodate international students’ learning styles (McLean and Ransom 2005). Whilst this shifts responsibility for transition difficulties from students to teachers, compensating pedagogically for cultural differences implies that international students lack the ability to adjust to new ways of learning, which is arguably still reminiscent of a deficit approach.

A further criticism of the academic transition literature is the tendency for socio-cultural aspects of transition to be ignored. Given the myriad academic and socio-cultural challenges that international students encounter, these should be addressed collectively (Guo and Chase 2011; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010). Moreover, the short orientations typically delivered at the start of academic programmes deny students the time required to adjust to the new educational culture, and the opportunity to explore

and make sense of their intercultural learning experiences. Transition support interventions should thus span over longer periods (Foster 2013; Guo and Chase 2011; Trice 2004). Guo and Chase (2011) provide an important exception, reporting on a successful longitudinal support programme for international graduate students in Canada. One aspect of this programme involved developing understanding of the Canadian academic culture by exploring cultural learning experiences and raising awareness of cultural differences. This more culturally inclusive approach is in line with the stance adopted here and resonates with the suggestion that institutions have a role to play in making their educational cultures transparent to new students (Hughes 2013). A final criticism of the literature is that despite recommendations such as these, very few studies advance understanding by evaluating transition support initiatives. This study was set within the context of these limitations. It took place within the health and life sciences faculty of a post-92 UK University and reports on a longitudinal support initiative which aimed to assist international students in both their academic and sociocultural transitions to UK higher education. In doing so, it responds to calls for more evidence-based research on how to best support them (Rienties, Luchoomun, and Tempelaar 2014).

Methods

CAKES: (Cultural Awareness and Knowledge Exchange Scheme) and participants

Drawing upon the insights gained from the literature, a transition scheme which became known as 'CAKES' was designed and marketed to all new international students within the faculty. The initiative was delivered across an academic year by three learning development staff and involved weekly, lunchtime workshops. Workshops included a

blend of academic (e.g. academic writing, critical thinking) and sociocultural activities (e.g. trips, exploring intercultural learning experiences, local dialect lessons). Around 20 students attended every week on a voluntary basis. Students represented 22 different countries and a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate students across various subject disciplines.

The teaching strategy was facilitative, informal and student-driven. Cakes were used in a tangible and symbolic sense; tangibly as an edible treat and theme for fun activities, and symbolically as a teaching aid and metaphor for cultural identity. Cultural awareness was promoted in themed workshops in which staff and students shared stories and experiences in wide-ranging topics such as education, language, dance, cuisine and other cultural traditions. During these interactions, staff and students were regarded as equals in an effort to minimise perceptions of power imbalances. To ensure that needs were addressed and foster a sense of ownership, students were actively encouraged to share their challenges and identify workshop topics.

Data collection

The purpose of the data collection was to gain a rich, insight into students' experiences of participating in CAKES and the underlying mechanisms that explain these. A qualitative approach that valued depth over breadth was therefore undertaken. Focus groups were chosen to facilitate discussion and present a more comfortable setting for those whose English language skills were less developed. As it was not possible to find a time that suited all participants, a mix of group and individual interviews was undertaken. Specifically, two focus groups and three semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted. All interviews took place at the end of the initiative with convenience samples of students and were audio recorded with participants' permission. The interview guide was developed following the recommendations of Breakwell

(2012) and included open, non-leading questions designed to explore the impact of CAKES on participants' transition experiences. The interviewer was mindful of Hughes' (2004) recommendations for collecting data from international populations and care was taken to avoid use of language with potential for misinterpretation. Additionally, participants were encouraged to be open and honest and were assured that by doing so they would not be causing offence.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author and subjected to content analytic procedures recommended by Berg and Lune (2012). This involved extracting themes by assigning labels to individual quotations. Themes that reflected common threads were then clustered together to form incrementally more general categories which were referred to as 'first-order' and 'second-order' themes. When themes could not be generalised further, they were termed the 'general dimension.' This hierarchical theme-building process was undertaken by the first author and the resultant thematic framework was independently examined by the second and third authors to check that they were satisfied with the labelling and categorisation of themes.

Results

Eighty themes were identified in the analysis of interview data. These were hierarchically clustered to form three general dimensions. The thematic frameworks from the first-order theme level are presented in figures 1-3 and discussed below with illustrative quotations. Below we draw upon the insights from this data and our own reflections to help unearth the underlying processes that explain how CAKES worked.

Academic transition

Academic integration comprised 30 themes which were clustered into the higher-order categories summarised in Figure 1. Students reported enhancements in a range of academic literacies. For example, the culturally diverse, low stakes environment encouraged dialogue and verbal communication skills to flourish, as is reflected in the following comment:

...because it's a place where you meet people from different countries and you know, so having to understand and then communicate effectively with the other person has really, really helped to develop our communication skills.

Underlying these developments and emerging as a strong theme was the clearer understanding students gained of the local learning culture. These gains owe much to the knowledge exchange processes which were a central feature of the learning and teaching strategy. Although experiences were exchanged across a range of cultural domains, emphasis was placed on the culturally bound nature of learning, and cultural differences in learning and teaching practices were explicitly addressed. Through these interactions, students gained access to the 'hidden curriculum' (Leask 2009), acquiring valuable knowledge about institutional practices such as how to prepare for tutorials, the purpose of active classroom participation and expected relationships with teachers. Here we were mindful of the importance of valuing diversity and acknowledging students' skills and identities (Ryan and Viete 2009). Therefore, rather than suppressing students' previous learning practices, we explored and rewarded difference and valued the diverse skills, identities and attributes that they brought. This approach provided a nurturing environment in which students could critically reflect on their educational experiences and reconstruct understandings of what it means to learn. One student explained:

It's like when we are in lectures we notice the different functioning but we don't really get to think about it. But when we come to CAKES we are able to think through the process, so CAKES is the opportunity for us to understand how it's working.

Greater cognisance of local learning conventions and expectations helped students forge a stronger connection with the university's learning community and confidence to operate within it. Indeed, feeling part of the academic community emerged as a strong theme in itself, further evidencing students' successful academic transition. One student explained:

I didn't feel that I was part of the lectures when I first came here... I felt that I was alone; I was not in it, you know? But when I attend CAKES I felt that everyone was involved and we learned the way of learning and I felt part of it.

[Figure 1 near here]

In keeping with the concept of knowledge 'exchange', it was not just students who developed their cultural understandings; the cross-cultural learning resulting from sharing experiences was truly educational for staff. In addition to learning about, and even experiencing, different cultural traditions, we gained an authentic insight into the range of academic literacies that students possessed. For example, contrary to stereotypes presented in the literature, we were struck by students' excellence in deeper forms of learning. Whilst these findings highlight the sense of dislocation that students often experience when operating within an unfamiliar learning culture, they also demonstrate how relatively simple measures can assist academic adaptation and success. Students in this study were by no means deficient in academic skills; rather it seems that the opportunity to critically explore cross-cultural learning experiences was a strong determinant of their successful transition.

Learning and teaching environment

The learning and teaching environment emerged as a general dimension with 29 themes. Here students recognised the teaching style as distinct and noted its attentive, student-driven focus and the absence of traditional power dynamics. This contrasted with their experiences of learning in formal classes where they felt less understood by staff. One student, for example, recalled being pleasantly surprised because CAKES staff ‘were actually paying attention to us’. Students also commented on the informal atmosphere, which put them at ease and provided positive conditions for learning:

I think the way the environment was managed was comfortable, because it’s not really like the lecture room. We feel relieved and we’re able to ask anything and we can absorb more; I like the environment – it’s really relaxing, just eating and talking.

The notion that informality assisted the learning process emerged elsewhere in the data where, for example, one student described how her ‘tension’ in lectures acted as a barrier to learning but that ‘CAKES brought down the tense state and allowed the academic part to settle in.’ Of particular value in setting this informal tone was the routine provision of cakes. As a culturally ingrained social practice, eating helped establish CAKES as a social learning community and set the tone for the kind of casual dialogue for which students had limited opportunities in their formal curricula. This helped develop their confidence to engage with the discursive expectations of the classroom, which were initially perceived as threatening. Indeed, as shown in Figure 2, overcoming social anxieties relating to speaking in class formed one of the largest themes in this dimension. Connecting with the general dimension above, being able to contribute to class discussions helped students identify themselves as members of the learning community. One student said:

...for me if I can discuss more in the class I feel part of it but previously I couldn't discuss anything. The teacher asked if we had any questions and we had but we didn't know how to ask and CAKES taught me to do that.

Although providing opportunities for students to critically reflect on their learning experiences was a key precursor to them gaining this sense of belonging, these findings indicate that the characteristics of the learning space were also important. Specifically, findings demonstrate the value of creativity in building informal learning spaces and the importance of providing the social learning opportunities, and their associated dialogic interactions, that international students are often denied (Ryan 2000).

[Figure 2 near here]

Social transition

It was clear from student narratives that CAKES provided a number of meaningful social experiences which influenced social transition. *Social transition* thus emerged as a general dimension, comprising 21 themes which were carried directly to the general dimension level (Figure 3). These included making friends and having fun with activities such as seasonal parties and learning local dialect. Recalling the Christmas party, one student stated:

The Christmas party, it was such fun and really at that time we had so many things to do because of the exams but we really enjoy it and we never forget it.

The largest theme within this dimension, however, was the social support gained. Clear in the data was the emergence of a highly valued peer learning network in which students constructed understandings and made sense of new teachings. Co-

creating knowledge in this way fostered a strong bond and close friendships. As one student put it:

...we came to a group understanding and it was like building up layers of knowledge together ... And I guess we got closer because of this, because we helped each other.

Having this social network not only supported students academically; emotional and psychological gains were apparent as they forged a sense of social connectedness and feeling that they were not alone. Reflecting their positive appraisals of these outcomes, students used terms such as ‘inspiration’ and ‘home away from home’ to describe their experiences of participating in the scheme. These findings demonstrate the power of peer support systems in aiding transition and contribute to evidence demonstrating how successful social transition can assist academic transition among international students (Menzies and Baron 2014).

Taken as a whole, findings suggest that participating in CAKES was an important contributory factor in students’ academic and socio-cultural transitions. A final important point is that many of the positive gains that were reported by students emerged over time. This is illustrated in observations of power dynamics during the first academic session, where subordinate behaviour patterns and tentative contributions to group discussion evolved to strong leadership and lively debate. Whilst caution is required when attributing such changes to the CAKES initiative, they demonstrate the need for longitudinal transition support.

[Figure 3 near here]

Discussion and conclusions

This study set out to investigate a transition support initiative (‘CAKES’; Cultural

Awareness and Knowledge Exchange Scheme) for international students at a UK university and in doing so, contribute to the limited evidence base on how to best support them. In contrast to traditional deficit support provisions, which typically approach transition as a brief and unidimensional process, CAKES adopted a holistic and developmental ethos. Findings suggest that the initiative effectively supported transition, nurturing students from feeling isolated and unfamiliar with the academic culture, to a sense of social connectedness and academic confidence. Although this study was small-scale, and results must therefore be viewed with caution, they strongly highlight the need for support to address the various dimensions of transition both collectively (Guo and Chase 2011; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010) and longitudinally (Foster 2013; Guo and Chase 2011; Trice 2004).

What might be considered CAKES' 'active ingredient', however, was the explicit consideration of cultural learning differences. Importantly, the initiative did not attempt to fix skill 'deficits'; nor did it encourage international students to abandon their previous learning styles in favour for those typically associated with the Western tradition. Rather, students were assisted in decoding the educational culture within an inclusive environment which valued the diverse skills and attributes that they had to offer. It seems that it was this environment, coupled with the opportunity to critically reflect on their learning experiences, which allowed students to expand their cognitive frameworks and gain a sense of belonging within the local learning community.

This study therefore offers a new perspective which questions traditional practice relating to international student transition. It demonstrates that international students are highly capable of adapting to new ways of learning if they know what is expected of them, and challenges the Western academy's often dismissive view of their cognitive abilities, and the deficit models that continue to be applied. Accordingly, it is

recommended that those planning transition support give international students the opportunity to critically reflect on their cultural learning experiences and explore what it means to learn. If students are able to adapt successfully with this kind of support, then the need to compensate pedagogically for ‘mismatches’ between learning and teaching styles is disputable.

This stance not only aligns with the need for open discussion around expectations (Lobo and Gurney 2014; Divan, Bowman, and Seabourne 2015), it resonates strongly with the proposal that tacit features of local learning cultures should be made explicit, rather than adapted, to accommodate international students’ diverse learning styles (Blasco 2015). Such a focus on making learning cultures transparent would represent an important step away from blaming students and step towards properly valuing the rich insights they have to offer. Exploring educational experiences through the kind of knowledge exchanges used in this study might be a very effective way of raising awareness of how and why expectations for learning differ in different cultures, and of bringing tacit elements to the fore. In doing so, staff can understand intercultural learning experiences more deeply and in turn, support learning transitions more thoughtfully.

Finally, whilst the role of culture in defining the nuances of academic structures and cultures are acknowledged, the previously highlighted caution against overplaying its influence should not be overlooked. Whilst this study, like many others, highlights the tremendous challenges that international students face, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the transition to higher education can also present difficulties for local students (Jones 2005). Indeed, it is possible that many of the experiences captured in this study stem from a core group of challenges shared by all students transitioning into higher education. Therefore, whilst it is hoped that the findings of this study will

contribute strongly to ongoing efforts to support international students, practitioners are urged to consider their implications broadly, in an endeavour to enhance the quality of teaching for all.

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Figure 1: First and second-order themes comprising the Academic Integration general dimension

Figure 2: First and second-order themes comprising the Learning & Teaching Approach general dimension.

Figure 3: First-order themes comprising the Social Integration general dimension.